New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1950

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of December 18, 1950*

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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Bless You All"

Daily Mirror

December 15, 1950

'Bless You All' Blessed With Many Laughs

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Bless You All," which Herman Levin and Oliver Smith brought to the Mark Hellinger Theatre last evening, is not without its blessings, though we wish it had more of them. The producers were not backward about taking the rubber-band off their collective bankroll when it came to buying top-flight performers. We wish they had been as generous with the bucks when it came to material.

Jules Munshin is one of the funniest comics you'll see today on stage or screen. And Mary McCarty is a riotously effective femme funster. Pearl Bailey has an inimitable throw-away song style. And Valerie Bettis' dancing strikes across the footlights like a lightning bolt. But, unfortunately, author Arnold Auerbach and composer Harold Rome haven't always provided them with top-drawer sketches and songs worthy of their outstanding talents.

At its best, the new revue is sheer delight. You'd have to be a Sphinx not to roar at Munshin and Miss McCarty showing the possibilities of video for presidential candidates in "TV Over the White House," and we think that even Mona Lisa would have done more than smile enigmatically at Munshin's encounter with the new miracle drugs and La McCarty as a women's club official making Peter Pan serve the higher purposes of the P.T.A.

Miss Bailey stopped the show a couple of times with her blase rendering of "When" and "You Never Know What Hit You—When It's Love." And Miss Bettis won "bravos" with her moody "A Rose Is a Rose" and her sexy "Desert Flame" ballets, choreographed by Helen Tamiris.

Other capables in the cast are Byron Palmer, Robert Chisholm, Jane Harvey, Garry Davis, Gene Barry and Donald Saddler.

Co-producer Smith has designed an opulent production, which is handsomely complemented by Miles White costumes. Don Walker, Lehman Engel, Mischa and Wesley Portnoff merit salutes for their exceptional orchestral and vocal arrangements. They are among the best we have heard in recent seasons. Director John C. Wilson has worked wonders even when handicapped by skimpy and sometimes ribald wordage.

Levin and Smith have come up with some of the prettiest and shapeliest chorines that will be likely to soothe jaded eyes this semester. They are just what the tired business man ordered.

"Bless You All" is stunning pictorially, hilarious when Munshin and Miss McCarty hold the stage, tunefully exciting when Miss Bailey does her stuff and quite exotic when Miss Bettis is on view. Despite its occasional lapses, the new arrival provided us an enjoyable evening. As for the paying customers, they blistered their palms applauding and taxed their tonsils cheering.

"BLESS YOU ALL"

Revue with music and lyrics by Harold Rome; sketches by Arnold Auerbach; staged by John C. Wilson; dances and musical ensembles staged by Helen Tamiris; costumes by Miles White; presented by Herman Levin and Oliver Smith at the Mark Hellinger Theatre, December 14, 1950, with a cast including the following: Jules Munshin, Mary McCarty, Pearl Bailey, Valerie Bettis, Garry Davis, Charlene Harris, Gordon Edwards, Gene Barry, Dorothy Etheridge, Dick Reed, Eleanor Boleyn, Donald Saddler, Carlene Carroll, Sage Fuller, Vera Lee, Ilona Murai, Emy St. Just, Helen Wenzel, Swen Swenson, Joseph Gifford, Phillip Nasta, Bertram Ross, John Sandal, Robert Chisholm, Gwenna Lee Smith, Dell Parker, Jill Melford, Jeane Williams, Lee Barnett, Billie Kirpich, Clive Dill, Irene Riley, Betsy Holland, Ray Morrissey, Joe Nash, Elmira Jones-Bey, Byron Palmer and Kris Nodland.

New York World-Telegram and The [illegible] Sun

December 15, 1950

Talent Jam-Packs 'Bless You All'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Musical revue.
Cast—Prodigal with talent.
Credit—Superlative peaks.
Debit—Ordinary valleys.
Dances—Sensational.
I find it—Fresh and winning.

"Bless You All" is a new revue that tries to be different. When it succeeds, like the little girl with the curl, it is very very good. When it misfires, its deportment is pretty depressing.

Once it gets going, the high points have such altitude that the rest can be forgotten. It is a lovely, festive, circusy show to look at, with sparkling sets and joyful costumes.

The billing stars Jules Munshin, Mary McCarthy and Pearl Bailey, each of whom is vastly gifted and intentionally generous. Featured is Valerie Bettis, and in many ways it is her evening.

Long Satire.

The summit of the show is a number called "Desert Flame," which is a satire on ballet, opera, movies and overacting. Miss Bettis appears as an unprincipled North African dame who loves and loses a visiting cowboy. It is one of the longest numbers ever seen in a Broadway revue, but every moment of it counts. It is violently sexy and boisterously funny. Miss Bettis performs with brilliant precision, economy, wit and controlled ferocity.

This is great revue material, and performed this way, stands with the finest modern stuff any ballet company has offered. In a delightfully original art gallery sketch, Miss Bettis performs the impossible with grace and ease, and she stops the show singing a tricked-up satire on the lowest down of blues.

Jules Munshin has varied chances to show his wide talent. I particularly liked the way he sustained and built a sketch about fancy new drugs. And he works hard with excellent effect as Joe Blow, who campaigns by the flossiest of television methods in a revue within the revue.

PTA Peter Pan.

Mary McCarthy also gives the impression of working pretty hard, but this loses importance when along come such wonderful moments as her imitation of Peter Pan at a Parent Teachers meeting, or the "Little Things" song she lovingly sings while bricking her spouse up in the wall.

Pearl Bailey is her old, sly, saucy self, as she sings a couple of songs out in front of a curtain. You can't depress a good girl like this one. She is trouper enough to make unexciting material sound bouncy and full of beat, so that when she finishes with "When It's Love" you might think it was a hit.

The pleasantest song in the score is "Take Off the Coat," and the catchiest, "I Can Hear It Now." The latter has a lovely nostalgic dance that recalls the steps of the Twenties, and laughs at them tenderly. This attitude lingers in mind enough to make the final "Roaring 20s" song a raucous jolt.

Breezy Dance.

A delightful and original notion is the "Summer Dresses" number with its breezy dancing pantomime, and the singing of Byron Palmer. Palmer also sings a "Love Letter to Manhattan" in front of a striking curtain of the palace and gardens of Versailles.

Another bright set is the beach, almost sunny enough to make up for the silly number about amateur painters that goes on in it. This is one of the items Munshin struggles valiantly with, and it seems unfair, when he can make so much out of the flippant "Better Way to Make a Living" without trying half so hard.

Jane Harvey is entrusted with several of the vocals, and the sketches get sturdy assists from Garry Davis and Robert Chisholm.

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune
December 15, 1950

= *By* HOWARD BARNES =

A Glittering Revue

A GAY and bountiful revue has opened at the Mark Hellinger. "Bless You All," with songs by Harold Rome and sketches by Arnold Auerbach, has style, wit, pace and musical felicity. It ranges from captivating solos by Mary McCarty and Pearl Bailey and hilarious clowning by Jules Munshin to extravaganza in the great Ziegfeldian tradition. The satire lampoons such topical targets as electioneering by television, novels from the deep South, foreign stars, miracle drugs and P. T. A. school activities. The production numbers, with Valerie Bettis weaving sinuously through brilliant Helen Tamiris ballets, are stunning. All in all it is an abundant and glittering entertainment.

• • •

If inspiration falters once or twice, the stars are there to restore bounce and crescendo to the proceedings. Rarely has a revue been blessed with such excellent and engaging performers. Munshin sings, dances and executes uproarious pantomime in the drug store scene with superb timing and comical effect. Miss McCarty takes part in elaborate skits and has a wonderful Charles Addams number by herself called "Little Things Meant So Much to Me," as she walls up her husband in the cellar. Miss Bailey is triumphant in "When" and "You Never Know What Hit You," in which she heckles the orchestra. And Miss Bettis does memorable dancing in the extraordinary "A Rose Is a Rose" ballet and a casbah number called "The Desert Flame."

• • •

"Bless You All" is a far cry from "Call Me Mister," but it finds its collaborators in fine fettle. Rome may have written more original songs for the earlier show, but his music implements the infinite variety of doings in the Hellinger offering splendidly, while his lyrics are eloquent and pertinent. From the infectious opening in which the audience gets the salutation of the title, to the witty final scene, "The Roaring 20's Strike Back," he is a top-flight tune-smith and lyricist. Auerbach has done his best sketch writing in intimate numbers such as "The Cold War," but his "TV Over the White House" brings down the first act curtain with a resounding flourish and "Peter and the P. T. A." is far funnier than you might think such a take-off on high school dramatics might prove.

That there is a certain lack of cohesion in quickly shifting scenes does not detract from the splendor of the Herman Levin-Oliver Smith production. Smith himself has devised striking backgrounds for the action and Miles White has used fine imagination in costuming the large company. Meanwhile John C. Wilson has supervised the staging artfully, balancing bits of business with crowded ensembles. "A Rose Is a Rose," with modern paintings coming to life is one of the most elegant and entrancing numbers ever to grace a revue. Miss Tamiris has been on her toes with her dancers always, with Donald Saddler, Eleanor Boleyn and "a swarm of sultry sylphs" giving her and Miss Bettis complete co-operation. "Bless You All" pays homage to its spectators. This one pays it right back and double. It is a theatrical event.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
December 15, 1950

The Newest of the Musical Revues

By Richard Watts Jr.

"Bless You All," which opened at the Mark Hellinger last night, is a handsome and colorful revue, with a number of interesting people to keep it moving along with smoothness and dispatch. That it isn't as funny as we had all hoped it would be comes as a surprise, since its sketches are by Arnold Auerbach, who proved in "Call Me Mister" and "Make Mine Manhattan" that he is an expert in the almost lost art of creating ingenious satirical material for such shows. The new revue has to depend on its pace, performers and good looks for its interest, and it is fortunate in all three respects, if not in its quest for hilarity.

It is certainly not from lack of ideas that Mr. Auerbach's sketches suffer. Using such phenomena as Southern regional authors, political campaigns on television, the national passion for "miracle" drugs, and "Peter Pan" as it might be presented as propaganda for the Parent-Teachers' Association as targets for his satire, he has come up with a pleasant conception almost every time, but only in the drugstore and the "Peter Pan" sketches, and a number in which Mary McCarty sings a nostalgic song about her husband as she walls up his slaughtered body, do the achievements approach the intentions.

Songs and Singers

Although Harold Rome's songs are pleasant and his lyrics brightly intelligent, his score is not, I suspect, a particularly notable one. Here, however, the show is happy in the quality of its performers. No one can put over a slyly comic song with more skill, easygoing charm and wonderful, bubbling humor than Pearl Bailey, and she makes her two numbers seem something not far short of masterpieces. Then, too, there is the lovely Jane Harvey, who sings as charmingly as she looks, which is an accomplishment of great value to any musical show. I think it would have been a fine thing if Miss Harvey had more to do.

Elaborate dance numbers are not usually, in my bigoted point of view, the most comforting part of a girl-and-music entertainment, but Valerie Bettis always gives an atmosphere of fierce and exhilarating excitement to her versions of the ballet that makes them arresting and notable. She has two handsome and picturesque numbers, one about painting and the other a wild melodrama with an exotic North African setting, and, although I cannot say that I found them very interesting dramatically, there is no doubt that Miss Bettis is excellent in them and that they add to the vividness of the evening.

Comics and Comedy

Since Jules Munshin and Mary McCarty are the stars chiefly responsible for acting out the comedy, their assignments are hardly the most desirable to be found in "Bless You All." Miss McCarty is an attractive and likable comedienne when she can control her own enthusiasm, and she is at her happiest singing wistfully about her late husband and playing a Peter Pan having considerable trouble with the flying equipment. Mr. Munshin's material is decidedly of an in-and-out nature, and I thought he was at his best as the drugstore patient in difficulty over his conflicting "miracle" drugs.

Oliver Smith, co-producer with Herman Levin of "Bless You All," is one of the most skillful scenic designers in the business, and he and Miles White, who did the costumes, have given the revue continuous pictorial effectiveness. And John C. Wilson, who stages musical shows with unfailing taste and dexterity, has kept the proceedings at a properly unflagging pace. Since I like my revues to be overrun with comic excellence, and Mr. Auerbach is usually just the man for such a job, I must confess to a bit of disappointment with "Bless You All," but, if you don't expect too much in this respect, there are a lot of bright spots in the new show.

Journal American

December 15, 1950

A Good Musical With Weak Spots

By JOHN McCLAIN

There are so many high spots in "Bless You All," the new musical which opened at the Mark Hellinger Theatre last night, that it seems almost a matter of criminal incompetence when parts of it fall below the level which it originally promises.

I think the ballet, "The Desert Flame," as performed by Valerie Bettis and others, is one of the most exciting things I've seen in the theatre since "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue," from which it both borrowed and added much.

Pearl Bailey can do no wrong in my manifesto, and so I was transfixed with her two big numbers, "When" and "You Never Know What Hit You—When It's Love."

Mary McCarty is an engaging and terribly enthusiastic performer, and I loved her as she sang her sad plaint, "Little Things Meant So Much To Me," the while she is sealing her husband into an old fireplace.

Munshin Fine

I also liked her as the wife of the Presidential aspirant who is conducting his campaign entirely by television. And in that same connection I thought Jules Munshin was excellent in the part of the president, although as one of his fans I thought he was generally hampered throughout the show by lack of material.

There were several beautiful long-legged dolls and some others who could dance exceedingly well, not to mention the fellas who twirled them around, and all the festivities were beautifully mounted. The whole thing had unquestionable pace and class and I think it's well worth seeing. I'm just sorry it wasn't a little better.

The score is not always as good as it should be, and most of the sketches were dreary. You tee off with a fine and exciting opening like "Bless You All," which promises so much, and pretty soon you're into a sketch about decadent Southern writers which is very special to begin with and not very funny the rest of the way.

Then everything picks up with a number called, "I Can Hear It Now," sung by Jane Harvey, and that leads into Miss Bailey's best spot, "When," but then everything declines into another sketch called "Back to Napoli," dealing with the arrival of an Italian movie star in Hollywood, and the mood is broken.

Worth the Trip

Thus it goes throughout the evening, from attic to cellar, but I thought the predominance was well above the level of the second floor.

Miss Bettis and Miss Bailey are worth the trip to the theatre, even though you will be unhappy that Mr. Munshin and Miss McCarty were not given more to work with.

You will be thankful to Harold Rome for the music and lyrics, which may never be memorable but are always deft and intelligent, and you will applaud the direction of Jack Wilson, who kept everything as fast and bright as possible.

You will also be delighted to see what the management calls "a swarm of sultry sylphs."

In fact, I think you will have a good time. It's just too bad you won't have an exceedingly good time.

DAILY NEWS

December 15, 1950

In Several High Spots, 'Bless You All' Is a Smart and Funny Revue

By JOHN CHAPMAN

When "Bless You All" is at its best, which is in several songs, sketches and dances, it is a good, bright revue. Its one drawback, which is not important enough to worry too much about, is that it occasionally loses pace and zest by running a number too long. "Bless You All" opened last evening at the big Mark Hellinger Theatre, and the first-nighters were happy watching and hearing such engaging entertainers as Jules Munshin, Pearl Bailey, Mary McCarthy and Valerie Bettis.

Some good show brains have been at work on the material—Harold Rome to write some admirable music and lyrics, Arnold Auerbach to devise some sharp-witted sketches, Miles White to devise some handsome costumes and Oliver Smith to design some very smart scenery. The director, John C. Wilson, might have fared better had he held a long, sharp needle in one hand and a long, sharp pair of cutting shears in the other.

Munshin Scores Often.

The best two sketches involve Mr. Munshin, whose resourcefulness as a good, low comedian is increasing. In one of the sketches Mr. Munshin has dropped into a drug store to get some aspirin for a cold and is sold, instead, several miracle drugs. Each pill does what is claimed for it—but there is an unexpected side effect and soon Mr. Munshin is a tottering wreck.

In another and more elaborate number, the comedian is running for the Presidency in 1960 and is conducting his campaign entirely by television—and here the writer, Mr. Auerbach, is at his funniest as he flails heartily away at TV revues and national politics. Mr.

Plenty of Bounce.

Munshin is even more amusing than Mr. Truman has been lately as he swaggers and hotchas through a TV show that has everything in it except an animal act. And the amazing Miss Bettis, who is an odd and fascinating dancer in other scenes of the revue, sings a wonderful song titled "Voting Blues." As a lady of the streets, she has forgotten to register and laments the fact that now she cannot vote.

McCarthy, Bailey Have Fun.

Miss Bettis also is the chief performer in two interesting, if somewhat drawn-out, ballets concerning a statue at the Museum of Modern Art and a sexy siren of the Sahara.

Miss McCarthy, always ready with bounce and good will, has a fine, humorous song giving reasonable reasons why she has just walled her husband up in the cellar, and she next hits a peak of fun by playing Jean Arthur in a sequel to "Peter Pan."

A couple of times during the evening Miss Bailey saunters out on the stage and takes over with typical Bailey numbers. She should be made an honorary member of the stage hands' union, for when she is out there "in one" the men behind the curtain know they can take all the time they need to set the next scene. Another very interesting singer, new to the Broadway stage, is Jane Harvey, and Miss Harvey has one of Mr. Rome's most interesting songs, "Take Off the Coat."

There are some others in the company who should be commended, including Byron Palmer, Gene Barry, Robert Chisholm, Garry Davis and a small boy, Lee Barnett, who is a first-class comedian. And the spectacle of Munshin munchin' miracle pills is just about worth the price of admission.

The New York Times

December 15, 1950

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Bless the scene and costume designers of "Bless You All," which opened at the Mark Hellinger last evening. They are Oliver Smith and Miles White. By putting their heads together, they have made the new revue the most stunning show in town. It looks both crisp and elegant, like a modern fashion magazine.

But in the opinion of one willing theatregoer the material seldom matches the décor or acquires the gusto and scope of a first-rate revue. Harold Rome has written the music and lyrics. Arnold Auerbach has written the sketches. For the principal entertainers there are Jules Munshin, an affable droll, Mary McCarty, who can clown and sing, and Pearl Bailey, who can make a ballad take on a piquant personality.

* * *

What they do would probably be riotous in a small theatre or supper club. For Mr. Rome's lyrics are literate and neatly edged with satire, and Mr. Auerbach's mind runs to things that ought to be held up to ridicule. Pooling their talents on one big production number, they show how a future candidate for the Presidency can conduct a gaudy campaign without once leaving the television studio. There is an amusing lampoon of "Peter Pan," adapted to the needs of a Parent-Teacher Association. Once there is something approaching hilarity in a drug-store sketch that experiments with miracle-drugs to cure the common cold.

In view of the talent involved it seems ungrateful to report that the humor is only tepidly funny. Perhaps the art of writing revue sketches has dwindled to the size of radio and night-club entertainment and has become obsolete in the theatre. Somehow it seems joyless and astringent, like a modern abstraction. Don't revue writers have fun any more?

Since the workmanship in the songs and sketches is on a small gauge, it is a pleasure to report that Valerie Bettis is still in there, dancing like a blast furnace. She has one elaborate sophistication in which the figures from three paintings step out of their frames and join in an interesting though cerebral ballet.

Less attenuated theatregoers will take greater pleasure in a shilling shocker she dances in honor of sin in the desert. Miss Bettis has a special talent for tabloid excitement, as her admirers remember from "Inside U. S. A." Her "Desert Flame" raises the room temperature of the theatre to a very comfortable boiling point. It is swift, vivid, melodramatic and ferocious. In fact, it is entirely okay.

In "Bless You All" you have to count your blessings frugally. For they are not as numerous as they ought to be, and seldom very bountiful. John C. Wilson has staged the numbers with brisk expertness, and Helen Tamiris has directed the dances and musical ensembles imaginatively. But Miss Bettis is the only performer dynamic enough to make much impression on the gleaming splendor of the production.

"Let's Make an Opera"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 14, 1950

Audience Shares Stage Spotlight

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Musical comedy.
Method—You do the singing.
Novelty—You're the actor.
Mood—Professionally fireside.
Score—Fresh, singable.
I find it—Haven for hams.

If ever a show appealed to an audience's vanity, "Let's Make an Opera," at the John Golden, does it. Everybody has sometime decided he was better than the people up on the stage. Here's a show that gives you the chance to prove it.

The method may sound complicated. In practice it is informal and relaxed. In the first scene a composer and a couple of grown-up singers explain a story to some children. Out of a simple plot about a chimney sweep, they will all build a musical.

Pass Out Lyrics.

The second scene is a dress rehearsal of the show. The audience is appointed chorus, and the conductor sets out to teach it songs, while the onstage cast looks on. After an intermission, the show is presented, and the audience sings its numbers.

Lyrics and music are available in print for the participating onlookers. These songs by Benjamin Britten are ingeniously constructed so their rythms and melodies are novel, yet they are readily singable. They are just tricky enough to make you feel extremely musical, in fact, you may be astonished at your prowess.

There is an introductory number about chimney sweeps, written in five-four tempo, then a syncopated waltz about bathing. There is also a four part chorale, for which different sections of the house impersonate different birds. I was an owl last night, and felt very superior.

All Join In.

If this sounds a little coy, remember that it is an honest entertainment. Nobody will go without knowing just what he is in for, or being determined to sing his head off. It can never get precious unless a lot of the audience refuse to join the fun. People in that mood will probably be at a movie where they throw you out for performing.

There is one striking effect of this public opportunity to cut loose with your vocal cords. It puts the paid performer at a big disadvantage. After mastering a couple of songs, you begin to feel that the people onstage are punks trying to get in on your act.

Actually they are very personable, sing pleasantly (if not as well as you do), and act agreeably, without getting grand or too stylish. The moving spirit of the whole affair is the conductor, Norman Del Mar, who teaches both amateurs and professionals on both sides of the footlights, and tosses the whole show about bodily to keep it moving along.

Confidence-Giver.

Randolph Symonette is the composer and plays a couple of characters in the play, and Rawn Spearman serves similarly numerous duties. Rosalind Nadell is the wicked housekeeper, and Lawrence Young is the chimney sweep. Prettier than any of them, and also more understandable, is Jo Sullivan, a blond alumna of "Oklahoma."

Marc Blitzstein has staged the show with pleasant informality and Aline Bernstein dresses it in nice Easter-eggy colors.

"LET'S MAKE AN OPERA"

Musical play with book and lyrics by Eric Crozier; music by Benjamin Britten; staged by Marc Blitzstein; scenery by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Aline Bernstein; presented by Peter Lawrence and the Show-of-the-Month Club at the John Golden Theatre, December 13, 1950. The cast:

Rosalind Nadell, Paul Carter, Claire Richard, Jo Sullivan, Angela Adamides, Frank Catal, Arlyne Frank, Randolph Symonette, Mario Santamaria, Lawrence Young, Rawn Spearman, Norman Del Mar—played by themselves.

THE OPERA

Big Bob	Randolph Symonette
Clem	Rawn Spearman
Miss Baggott	Rosalind Nadell
Rowan	Arlyne Frank
Juliet	Jo Sullivan
Gay	Frank Catal
Sophie	Claire Richard
Tina	Angela Adamides
Hughie	Paul Carter
Johnny	Mario Santamaria
Tom	Randolph Symonette
Alfred	Rawn Spearman

Synopsis: Act I. The Play. Scene 1. Rosalind's home. An autumn evening. Scene 2. Stage of the School Auditorium. Before Dress Rehearsal. Act II. The Opera. Scene 1. Nursery at Iken Hall, England, 1810. A January morning. Scene 2. A few minutes later. Scene 3. The following morning.

"Let's Make an Opera"—*continued*

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

December 14, 1950

= By HOWARD BARNES =

"Let's Not!"

ON THE assumption that theater-goers like to sing, "Let's Make an Opera" includes an audience in various musical capers at the John Golden. After an act of crashingly whimsical rehearsals, the customers intone four songs in a Benjamin Britten-Eric Crozier operatic fantasy about a chimney-sweep boy, rescued from his sorry lot by some pretty English lads and lasses of 1810. Despite some fetching Aline Bernstein costumes, the show is at its best in the rough, or with spectator participation, which is far from diverting for any one less than an arrant exhibitionist.

* * *

The Britten score is not bad, but its dissonances and odd rhythms constitute something of a hurdle for the vocal amateur. The lyrics by Crozier, incorporating such lines as "through thickets of rushes and tussocks of reeds," do not help matters appreciably. It takes all the exuberant let's get together folks spirit of Norman Del Mar to get such non-professionals as Brooks Atkinson to pretend that he is a turtle dove and sing "prr-ooo!" It takes more than his and Marc Blitzstein's over-all direction to make the opera itself more than a pretentious musical parlor game.

* * *

The company plays pattycake with the audience for such an extended period that it has only a brief interlude in which to show its theatrical and vocal quality. Then Arlyne Frank emerges as a singing actress of considerable charm in the part of the children's nursemaid and Rawn Spearman demonstrates that he is a Negro tenor of definite promise in the dual role of a sweep-master's apprentice and a gardener. Randolph Symonette is very sure of himself and the tots manage to keep on pitch surprisingly well.

"Let's Make an Opera" is very English in setting, mood and humor. Its fun depends almost entirely on the willingness of spectators to take a chance on making fools of themselves. The book, incidentally, is derived from a passage in Charles Kingsley's "The Waterbabies," which might better have been left between the covers of a book. There is a pleasant setting by Ralph Alswang and an eager-beaver orchestra, in which percussive effects are notable particularly the keyboard tinkling of Lucy Brown. The second scene of the rehearsal act is laid in a school auditorium. That is where "Let's Make an Opera" belongs.

The New York Times

December 14, 1950

Benjamin Britten's 'Let's Make an Opera' Beseeches the Audience to Sing

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Must everything be so arch? Benjamin Britten, the grand panjandrum of British music, has written a charming, nursery-book opera about a poor little chimney-sweep. Toward the end of a fairly trying theatre event it was put on at the John Golden Theatre last evening. In the past Mr. Britten has written some imposing operas that have set music-lovers to swooning in platoon formation.

His hymn to the shy spirit of a little chimney-sweep is much simpler than his serious pieces—melodic, pathetic and altogether delightful. For he has caught perfectly the make-believe of a children's story and told it with excitement and sincerity. Some ingratiating singers—both adult and juvenile—are singing and acting Mr. Britten's musical caprice, and a miniature orchestra, led by Norman Del Mar, lays a pleasant undertone of sound beneath the arias.

* * *

If the whole evening were devoted to this sort of child-book music-making, it would be a pleasant way of greeting the Christmas holidays. But Mr. Britten's concern for the miseries of a chimney-sweep does not turn up until an hour before the audience is ready to go home. It is the chief episode in something called "Let's Make an Opera," in which Mr. Britten pretends to be improvising a musical play at a rehearsal scene and in which Mr. Del Mar endeavors to persuade the audience to sing four songs.

The rehearsal scenes, which seem to have been staged by Marc Blitzstein, are about as spontaneous as a subway rush hour—the children painfully rehearsed to simulate childishness and the adults looking as al fresco as they can. Improvising in the theatre never has been so laboriously planned.

* * *

It is Mr. Del Mar's job to rouse the audience's love for community singing, and this may be regarded as a mistake. To one playgoer whose talents do not go beyond "O, Little Town of Bethlehem," most of Mr. Britten's songs are too difficult to be learned so rapidly and are pitched for people whose voices are changing. "The Night Song" is a lovely melody that can be handled without too much trouble and also enjoyed. But the other three songs are too Britten-esque for Gotham's guys and dolls.

Mr. Del Mar has been handed an impossible job. An educated Britisher, he has been brought across the Atlantic to stimulate New Yorkers into a mood of bland informality. This would be a neat trick if he could do it. Mr. Del Mar works very hard, wheedling and cajoling, shooting coy glances at the audience and making with the British patter. But informality becoms ponderously playful in circumstances like these, and it is to be feared that Mr. Britten and Mr. Del Mar lack the common touch.

After rather more of this than can be ignored, "Let's Make an Opera" actually does make the aforesaid little opera—book and lyrics by Eric Crozier, music by Mr. Britten, scenery by Ralph Alswang, costumes by Aline Bernstein, all being excellent in a light, imaginative vein. Among the singers are Randolph Symonette, Rawn Spearman, Rosalind Nadell, Arlyne Frank and Jo Sullivan.

Having failed noticeably in the chorus numbers, this column is in no position to express an opinion about the principals. But there is no harm in remarking that Mr. Spearman has a beautiful voice and that Miss Frank and Miss Sullivan are sweethearts.

Journal-American

December 14, 1950

Gets Off to Intriguing Start, Then Bogs Down

By JOHN McCLAIN

When I went over to the John Golden Theatre last night to look at something called "Let's Make an Opera" I had no warning that they were going to make it in my lap. But that's what happened.

The proceedings had barely gotten under way before a gentleman named Norman Del Mar, doubtless very talented, marched down the center aisle and took his stance four inches to port of my left foot and began leading the audience in a sort of communal sing-fest.

This went on for most of an act with Mr. Del Mar calling on various members of the assemblage to sing the parts of herons, owls and turtle-doves from a score which had been supplied along with the program.

To induce the response necessary he had to wave his baton quite a lot and I can only tell you that we couldn't have been more intimate if he'd been my barber, waving his comb through my unruly locks.

Music Eloquent

Because of this I may not be a competent judge of the whole show. Maybe if you sit farther back, especially if you fancy yourself as a turtle-dove who can sing "Prrr-ooo," the thing would take shape and meaning.

Even in my rather intimate locality I was able to sense that the music of Benjamin Britten was cloying and eloquent and that its rendition by Rosalind Nadell (if one is still permitted to express an opinion about a lady singer), Arlyne Frank, Randolph Symonette and Rawn Spearman was first class. But I seriously doubt that the fancy manner in which the festivities are presented will jam the gates of the theatre.

It is one of those plays-within-a-play. Rosalind Nadell and Randolph Symonette are sitting around the house dreaming up a school opera for six children and a few adults, and from this you dissolve into the dress rehearsal at the school auditorium.

That is the point at which Mr. Del Mar comes down the aisle, as though he were actually conducting the rehearsal, and involves the audience in singing some of the songs from the opera which is to follow.

* * *

Got Fouled Up

The entire second act is the opera itself, the story of a sad chimney sweep who is abandoned up a rich chimney and eventually rescued and freed by the cousins of the householders.

Mr. Del Mar operates from the pit during this session, but still keeps one eye on the audience and brings them back toward the finale for another sing session.

This is one of those efforts which one sincerely dislikes criticising, for there is no doubt of the intensity and integrity of all hands concerned, nor of the ingenuity of the idea.

I thought it got off to an intriguing start but became hopelessly fouled up with the communal sing idea. It seemed interminable, and when they finally got back to the story it was too late.

The ubiquitous Mr. Del Mar deserved a better and more leisurely fate; the book and lyrics of Eric Crozier were fanciful and appealing, although terribly cute at times, and Marc Blitzstein's direction made the most of the meagre plot.

The six sprouts sang and acted well, but they are quite young and will probably be better off after the show closes and they can get to bed earlier.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
December 14, 1950

Opera Faces Audience Resistance

By Richard Watts Jr.

The English, although reputedly a shy and reserved people, apparently have an extroverted and uninhibited quality when they go to the theatre that American audiences seem to lack. At least, Benjamin Britten's musical antic, "Let's Make an Opera," which calls for a lot of merry singing on the part of the spectators, and had a vast success in London, where the playgoers jovially pretended that they were owls, herons and chaffinches, whatever they are, to their hearts' content, showed little sign of a local repetition of that triumph at the John Golden last night.

Where the British public is said to have entered into the spirit of the occasion with gaiety and abandon, singing its collective head off at the bidding of its master of ceremonies, the New York first-nighters seemed sheepish and bewildered, joining in the audience-participation songs out of a stern sense of duty, but with few indications of ease or pleasure. A few sturdy souls here and there tried their best to oblige the producers and the cast by giving of their vocal best, but they struck me as pretty self-conscious about it.

American Shyness

This onrush of shyness in a land where, in the immortal words of the great Jimmy Durante, "everyone wants to get into the act," and where virtually every second citizen you pass in the street has at least been on a radio quiz show, may appear a little odd and uncharacteristic. Possibly it is the idea of an opera that is frightening. Having vast respect for culture, at least as an idea, New Yorkers perhaps feel that they should leave it to the professionals. Whatever the cause, the public didn't perform with much gusto last night.

The audience reticence assuredly can't be blamed on any lack of valiant determination on the part of Norman Del Mar, the British musical director and conductor whose ungrateful job it was to lead the first-nighters in song. A large and hard-working young man, with no end of self-confidence about him, Mr. Del Mar never gave up, and, although there were times when I feared that his somewhat unctuous benevolence might be on the verge of setting back Anglo-American friendship a couple of years, I ended with grudging respect for the dogged courage characteristic of his people.

The Opera

It is high time to add that "Let's Make an Opera" isn't all audience participation. There is a story, and, in a manner of speaking, an opera. The idea is that some children, aided by a few of their elders, are putting on a musical show about a boy chimney-sweep, and the first half of the evening consists chiefly of a rehearsal, with the conductor trying to get the spectators to help out with the chorus numbers. The second half of the show is the opera itself, and I must grant that Mr. Britten has written some charming songs for it.

In fact, I happily concede that the young English composer has provided a pleasant score. Despite its bird noises, "The Night Song," for example, is a rather lovely number. Hovering over the entire proceedings, though, there is an air of juvenile prankishness that is more frequently embarrassing than engaging. And the audience participation I am forced to regard as a gigantic flop, for all of Mr. Del Mar's bulldog grit. Of the youthful singers, only the pretty Jo Sullivan seemed of professional calibre. Since the audience decides not to, "Let's Make an Opera" isn't much fun.

DAILY NEWS
December 14, 1950

'Let's Make an Opera' a Beguiling Musical Novelty for the Holidays

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"Let's Make an Opera," with a score by Benjamin Britten and book and lyrics by Eric Crozier, is a witty and beguiling theatrical novelty, and I urge it upon all playgoers who truly love the stage and find pleasure in the imagination and resourcefulness which the theatre so infrequently exhibits. This little fantasy, which is a nursery tale about a chimney sweep, is Mr. Britten's best work since his big opera, "Peter Grimes." It was given a captivating first performance last evening at the John Golden Theatre.

The performers included the audience. You may think you cannot sing, and perhaps you can't, really; but surely you can say "Kaah" like a heron, or "To-whoo" like an owl, or "Prrr-ooo" like a turtle dove or "Pink, pink, pink" like a chaffinch. If you can manage this you are part of the show—and you will manage it, all right, for Norman Del Mar, the musical director, is a devilishly clever mass hypnotist, like Polgar. When Mr. Del Mar gives you the down beat with his baton you will kaah or to-whoo as he bids, and you may also find yourself singing some very modern songs.

A Hypnotic Conductor.

"Let's Make an Opera" is about a few grownups and several children who get together and, for fun, go about making an opera. They pick a simple story (courtesy of the poet William Blake) about a little chimney sweep who gets stuck in a chimney and is rescued and cared for by some other children. The youngsters—and you—are in on the making of this opera from the creation of the first musical phrase. In the first act Mr. Del Mar enlists your help and instructs you in the use of the song sheet which comes with the program. He needs this help, for, after all, the opera is a modest enterprise and his orchestra consists only of two pianists, two violinists, one cellist, one viola player and one drummer.

In the second act, after the rehearsal has been achieved, the charming people on the stage, numbering 11, go ahead with their performance, and when they are bidden the volunteers in the audience will contribute "The Sweep's Song," "The Night Song," "Sammy's Bath" and "Coaching Song." The persuasive Mr. Del Mar will have the audience singing parts, even, separating owls from turtle-doves and chaffinches from herons down the center aisle.

Great for Holidays.

I am often discouraged about how much—or little—playgoers really like the theatre, and it may be that "Let's Make an Opera" is too delicate a dish for those who hunger for meat, potatoes and a great dollop of gravy. But it could be that this quite enchanting musical prank will find many supporters like myself—and it has arrived at precisely the right time, with the city's youth just liberated for the Christmas holidays. It is a musical play for grownups who may like a middle-of-the-road modernist like Britten, but at the same time it is a fine thing for youngsters, whose hearts still are generous.

At a later date I hope to take up the individual performances and good qualities of the company. It is largely Mr. Del Mar's show, but there is much help from such as Randolph Symonette, Rosalind Nadell, Jo Sullivan, Rawn Spearman and some engaging children.

Daily Mirror
December 14, 1950

'Let's Make an Opera' Proves to Be Boring

By ROBERT COLEMAN

For some time, we have been hearing from England about "Let's Make an Opera," an audience-participation show, that enjoyed notable popularity across the Atlantic.

Last evening, Peter Lawrence and the Show-of-the-Month Club (Sylvia Siegler and Lou Cooper) brought us an American version of the Benjamin Britten-Eric Crozier novelty to the John Golden Theatre.

After sampling "Let's Make an Opera," we can only say that here again is an excellent instance of how different American and British entertainment tastes can be. Frankly, we can't see what our cousins over the water found in it to shout about. It impresses us as being a somewhat self-conscious, pretentious, juvenile bore.

The new arrival has to do with a group of nice people who compose and produce their idea of an opera in a high-school auditorium. The audience out front is asked to become a chorus, and sing along with the principals. It is even divided into sections which imitate various kinds of birds. And we're not kidding, either.

Orchestral conductor Norman Del Mar also doubles in brass as a pixyish emcee. His amiable mugging reminded us of what it might be like to watch Eddie Mayehoffe burlesque a long-hair batoneer. Rosalind Nadell, Randolph Symonette, Rawn Spearman, Jo Sullivan, Paul Carter, Claire Richards, Angela Adamides, Frank Catal, Arlyne Frank, Mario Santamaria and Lawrence Young impersonate valiantly the group composing and presenting an amateur opera about a young chimney sweep rescued by kindly children.

The customers are handed song sheets along with their programs, so that they be better equipped to warble and do bird calls on cue. It seemed inappropriate that the cuckoo should have been omitted in favor of such feathered friends as the owl, turtle dove, heron and chaffinch.

Composer-musical director Marc Blitzstein staged the production rather obviously, we thought. The scenery by Ralph Alswang is not too easy on the eyes, though some of the Aline Bernstein costumes are quite nice.

A musical stunt like "Let's Make an Opera" must be done with skill, subtlety and charm, to be effective. These qualities are absent much of the evening at the John Golden. By the watch, it is not too long a show. It only feels that way.

"The Cellar and the Well"

New York Post
HOME NEWS
December 11, 1950

Scenes of Chicago Family Life

By Richard Watts Jr.

With the best intentions in the world for the advancement of the American theatre, ANTA may have set that hapless institution back ten years yesterday evening. Certainly it did nothing to give impetus to the name of Philip Pruneau as a writer for a stage gravely in need of new dramatists. And I must add that it was of scant help to the histrionic reputation of Eda Heinemann, a veteran character actress with an excellent record of achievement. Maybe 5:30 in the afternoon is an unlucky time to open a play.

What happened is that the American National Theatre and Academy decided to offer as the second presentation of its season at the ANTA Playhouse a drama about the Chicago Irish called "The Cellar and the Well." It is the work of Mr. Pruneau, who is described as the resident playwright of the Civic Theatre in Erie, Pa., where his play was first enacted a year ago. No doubt Mr. Pruneau deserves to be encouraged, but it is no encouragement to expose "The Cellar and the Well" to the harsh inspection of the New York reviewers.

The Mayo Family

The author, who gives evidence of being a disciple of James Farrell's glumly realistic studies of Irish-American life on the South Side of Chicago, has written about a few tempestuous days in the history of the rather disorderly Mayo family. The Mayos consist of a loathsome old grandmother, a brawling father, a noble mother, and a sullen daughter, and they have a devil of a time. All kinds of unhappy things happen to them, the most pleasant of which is that the grandmother falls down the stairs and breaks her neck.

I will grant Mr. Pruneau a sympathetic interest in the good he believes exists far down beneath the disagreeable exteriors of the Mayos, an occasional distant hint of dramatic power, and a kind of passion for unpleasantly realistic detail. Perhaps one day he will arrange his combination of naturalistic observation and poetic aspiration into a play of valid interest. But right now he hasn't the necessary skill, and ANTA is doing him no service by exposing him to austere critical gaze at this point in his career.

Laughter

The sad truth is that, despite his earnestness and intensity, there were times when the first audience, despite its notorious politeness, got a little out of control and laughed when that wasn't the emotion the playwright intended. On the other hand, there were moments apparently intended for humor, such as the sight of matrons getting drunk at a wake, which seemed pretty melancholy. And I have serious doubts that the author's propensity for having his characters vomit at crucial times added to the value of his play.

It didn't strike me that most of the performers were of much help to "The Cellar and the Well." Miss Heinemann, in particular, was given to unfortunate excesses in her portrayal of the malicious and generally hateful old grandmother. I liked the performance of Helen Harrelson as a girl who understandably wants to run away from home, and Ann Dearing had some effective moments as the Mayo daughter, but, on the whole, the players gave evidence of being bogged down in their material. I can't blame them too much.

"THE CELLAR AND THE WELL"

Play by Phillip Pruneau; staged by Henderson Forsythe; settings by Paul Morrison; costumes by Ruth Morley; presented by George Freedley and R. L. Stevens under the sponsorship of the American National Theatre and Academy at the ANTA Playhouse, December 10, 1950. The cast:

Maureen Mayo ..... Ann Dearing
Grandma Mayo ..... Eda Heinemann
Theona Pringle ..... Helen Harrelson
Maud Mayo ..... Dorothy Sands
Howie ..... Edgar Grower
Miss Triumph ..... Mary Finney
Mr. Hubble .. Henderson Forsythe
Robert Francis Mayo .... Eric Mattson
Mrs. Farley .... Florence Beresford
Mrs. Dennis ..... Kathleen Bolton
Mrs. Lofab ..... Hannah Toback
A Young Woman .. Alice Winston
Her Husband ..... Gerry Walberg
Mrs. Flynn ..... Susan Steell
Mrs. Haggerty .... Fay Sappington
Mr. Haggerty ..... Frank Rowan

Synopsis: The entire action of the play takes place in the kitchen and back porch of a second-story flat in South side Chicago. Act I. Scene 1. A summer night in 1949. Scene 2. The same. Act II. Several hours later. Act. III. Three nights later.

Journal American

December 11, 1950

A Play Not Long For This World

By JOHN McCLAIN

There is no end of violence and harsh language in a little item called "The Cellar and the Well," by Phillip Pruneau, which made its appearance at the ANTA Playhouse as the second of their series yesterday.

But I must report regretfully that due to a combination of improper writing, acting and direction the whole effort added up to a bland and often ludicrous interlude in the theatre.

Lines designed to be funny or moving were not very, and the moments wherein life was examined seriously and at length rang with the echoes of other stages upon which identical thoughts have been unfurled before—and better.

Characters moved about with mixed motivations, belting each other freely at regular intervals, and speaking a strange tongue which at almost no time sounded to me like the South Chicagoese it was advertised to be.

What's to Follow

As this play is the considered choice of ANTA one cannot help being alarmed at the thought of what's to follow in the remainder of their season.

The whole action takes place in the kitchen and on the back porch of a South Chicago flat. Eda Heinemann, the wacky grandmother, presides over a tribe which includes Eric Mattson, her belligerent son, Dorothy Sands, his long-suffering wife; Ann Dearing, their tough-talking daughter, and Henderson Forsythe, a vastly articulate boarder, who is on hand to supply the message and interpret emotions.

Well, sir, the belligerent son is in the klink for belting a foreman and needs bail money. That is one problem. Another problem concerns the grand-daughter, whose boy friend wants to be on the cops but lacks funds and initiative and is hence having a tough time wooing her.

In his effort to improve his status he also belts a guy at a dance. This has the effect he desires but it doesn't improve his appearance.

Belts Boarder

Meantime the belligerent son's wife, in an effort to make some money, goes off with the boarder to sell ice cream cones at an amusement park. She is no sooner out the door than her husband appears, freshly sprung from the pokey, runs down the industrious couple at the park and belts the boarder.

Some other people get belted here and there and finally the grandmother goes to her death in a dry dive down the back stairs.

For me it was difficult to discover at which point the inept direction left off and the overacting began. Or whether it might not have also been the fault of a trite and muddlesome script.

In any event, and considering the fact that the show began at 5:30 and ran through dinner hour (hence not improving the dispositions of the viewers) I'm afraid the new ANTA offering will not be long in our midst.

DAILY NEWS

December 11, 1950

Second ANTA Drama, 'The Cellar And the Well,' Is an Anticlimax

By JOHN CHAPMAN

If there ever was a real anticlimax, it is "The Cellar and the Well," which the American National Theatre and Academy offered its loyal subscribers late yesterday afternoon. Having begun so nobly with Judith Anderson's Greek thriller, "Tower Beyond Tragedy," ANTA now occupies itself with a dreary and unpleasant drama about unpleasant and dreary peasants living on the south side of Chicago. Philip Pruneau, the author of "The Cellar and the Well," is identified in the program as being the Resident Playwright of the Erie, Pa., Civic Theatre. I hope Erie is a nice place to reside in, for Mr. Pruneau's South Chicago version of "The Lower Depths" is not a work of New York professional calibre.

Mr. Pruneau's mind and ambition seem to be on the right track, but his execution is faulty. His aim is to examine with compassion the sad frustration of some very, very ordinary people—and it is well known that "ordinary" people can suffer just as greatly as Clytemnestra and Aegisthus or Tristan and Isolde. It is a splendid aim, if not a new one in the theatre; but such a drama should have some nobility of character among its characters, and this element is lacking in the new ANTA offering. The people are uninteresting, which is worse than being unpleasant.

Several Assorted Characters.

Mr. Pruneau's people include Grandma Mayo, a suspicious old crackpot; Robert Francis Mayo, her son, who is always fighting his way into jail; Maud Mayo, Robert's sweet and timid wife, who is a drip; Maureen Mayo, the daughter of Robert and Maud, whose idea of romance is to go out and have a beer with her boy friend.

Also included in the cast of characters are a female religious maniac, several Irish men and women who take embarrassing delight in the food and drink of a wake, a gentlemanly roomer who would like to take Maud Mayo away from her husband and make her happy (she turns him down at the final curtain, wise woman, for he is a bore), and a neighbor girl who craves fudge and dreams of beating the daylights out of her mother.

Mary Finney Helps.

The earnest players in this drama include Eda Heinemann as Grandma, Dorothy Sands as her long-suffering daughter-in-law and Eric Mattson as her quarrelsome son. Other principals are Ann Dearing as the daughter, Helen Harrelson as the fudge-eater, Henderson Forsythe as the gentlemanly roomer and Mary Finney as the religious maniac. Miss Finney, who was so amusing as the tourists' guide in "Southern Exposure," assumes charge of the stage when she is on it and gives a raucous, uninhibited performance. The others are not particularly impressive.

Perhaps I am too severe in the foregoing summary, considering that all is being done out of sheer love for the drama. ANTA's avowed purpose is to give its theatre and its facilities to dramatists and producers whom the high cost of living would bar from the commercial Broadway stage, and this is a nice purpose. George Freedley and R. L. Stevens, the producers of "The Cellar and the Well," now have had the benefit of seeing Mr. Pruneau's play performed upon a stage, and I suppose it will do them some good. Their setting, executed by Paul Morrison, is admirable.